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What Exactly Is a Social Entrepreneur?

August 16, 2010

By [JAY GOLTZ](#)

Thinking Entrepreneur

I understand social. I understand entrepreneur. But when you put the two words together, I have to pause.

I pause because I wonder whether social entrepreneur is really entrepreneurship the way I understand it — where a business owner takes risk in the hope of making money. I guess my question is this: If it's mostly about the social good, what makes it entrepreneurship? And if it's mostly about the entrepreneurship, what makes it social? Isn't the phrase an oxymoron?

I understand that there's nothing new about social entrepreneurship. I guess I've had these slightly vague questions about the term for some time, but I have never given it much thought, because I've been consumed with the other kind of entrepreneurship — the kind where you spend most of your energy trying to solve your **own** problems, not those of society.

But I've met someone recently who has given me reason to reconsider. His name is Seth Weinberger, and for 25 years he was a partner at the law firm [Mayer Brown](#) and a member of its global information technology practice. Today, he is also the founder of [Innovations for Learning](#) and the developer of its first software programs and the [TeacherMate](#) handheld computer.

The story starts 18 years ago in Evanston, Ill. Mr. Weinberger and his wife were having a problem finding a suitable preschool for their son. They and six other families decided to start their own. At this point, Mr. Weinberger was not yet an entrepreneur, but he clearly was a problem solver. Along with painting and cleaning, he took on the self-appointed task of getting some computers and software for the school.

He went to Best Buy and searched through the “edutainment” programs. What he found was far more entertainment than education. No problem. He was sure that he was just looking in the wrong place and reached out to people in the academic world to figure out where to go. But he was surprised to discover that almost everyone he talked to knew of some attempt to bring computer-aided instruction to the schools that had ended in frustration and failure. No one he spoke to knew of an attempt that had succeeded.

But Mr. Weinberger had an idea — again, not an entrepreneurial idea but a solution. One of his legal clients was in the business of producing “shoot-em-up” computer games; perhaps the client would be able to write the software he needed. In fact, the client was able to help, and the company wrote a prototype program that allowed kids to practice basic phonic skills. Mr. Weinberger took the program and showed it to some faculty at an inner city school near Cabrini Green, a public housing project in Chicago that was well known for its violence and deplorable living conditions.

The teachers loved it. They were in desperate need of help, and they were very appreciative. Mr. Weinberger knew he was on to something and eagerly reported the success back to his client. The response from the client was clear: “This is not the beginning, this is the end. There is no money in educational software. You are on your own.” This is when, for Mr. Weinberger, the social began to meet the entrepreneur.

The passion for this project came from the social side; the entrepreneurial part came out of necessity. He was still a lawyer at a major firm, but he worked on coding the software programs from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m. He raised money. Slowly, he made progress. This went on for **12 years**.

One of the turning points came when he realized that he had gotten the software to work but that the hardware in the schools was too unreliable to use. He needed a total solution, and by this time the technology was moving toward handheld devices. First he tried to find a manufacturer that already made handheld units to partner with him, but nothing panned out.

Eventually, he fully embraced entrepreneurship and contracted with a company in China to make a handheld device that would be inexpensive and run the software. It worked. He got it in 12 schools in Chicago, serving 300 kids. Before long, it was in 200 schools in Chicago. It is now serving 40,000

children in 35 states. (Which is still less than 1 percent of the market).

At this point, things finally began to come together. He had something tangible that worked, and everyone could see both the value and the opportunity. He has gotten major grants from foundations and companies, including [JPMorgan Chase Foundation](#), which has given him \$500,000 thus far and has connected him with the [Urban Education Exchange](#), a New York nonprofit that is focused on reading comprehension; and [Teach For America](#), which will use TeacherMate in kindergarten, first-grade and second-grade classes in Phoenix and Chicago this year.

Is Mr. Weinberger doing social good? Obviously. Is he an entrepreneur? Well, he's not taking financial risk, and he's not making any money off of this venture. But he clearly has passion, vision, tenacity, and the ability to solve problems. And he's capable of manic behavior. Sounds like an entrepreneur to me.

But whatever you call him, I take my hat off to him. It has been a long and difficult journey, and the road ahead looks no easier and no shorter.

Jay Goltz owns five small businesses in Chicago.

Top 10 Reasons for Entrepreneurial Success

August 31, 2010, 7:00 am

By [JAY GOLTZ](#)

Thinking
Entrepreneur

I really have only one indulgence. I bought an expensive convertible a few years ago. It is not a midlife crisis car; I would call it a midlife celebration car. It is not red. It was a prerecession purchase.

In any case, I was driving to work one recent morning, sitting at a stoplight when a car pulled up next to me and the young man behind the wheel rolled down his window. He shouted over, "How can I be successful like you?"

I sensed he was serious. I appreciated his moxie, and I wanted to give him a great answer. I also knew that I had between five and 10 seconds for the pearls of wisdom to be hatched and delivered. I didn't panic. I went with my two favorite standbys: make sure your customers are happy and make sure your employees are with the program. The light changed. He seemed pleased with his stoplight counseling. He thanked me, and we both drove off.

But I started thinking: Is that the best I could do? Did I give him enough to get him on his way? Should I have mentioned the "work hard and follow your passion" mantra? No. He certainly has heard that before. Still, I wished I'd had another chance. I feared this would haunt me forever — or at least until lunch. And then, voila! We were at the next stoplight, and he was again next to me, again with his window and mind open. Rebound. I get another shot!

He told me he was graduating from [DePaul University](#), and he wanted to know what else I had for him. By this point, I'd realized that I couldn't give him the secret to business success in 10 seconds. That would take at least a minute, but I was not prepared. It is an excellent question that requires some thought. I told him I'd post an answer on this blog. So, to you DePaul graduate with moxie, here is what I believe are the most important success factors in business:

1. Look for opportunities to do something better than just about everyone else.
2. Accept risk as a necessary evil. It makes for much less competition.
3. Act responsibly to customers, employees and vendors.
4. Goals aren't enough. You need a plan. You need to execute the plan.
5. You need to fix the plan as you go. Learn from your mistakes. Most people don't.
6. Do not reinvent the wheel. Learn from others — join a business group.
7. Make sure the math works. I know plenty of people who work hard and follow their passion but the math doesn't work. If the math doesn't work, neither does the business.
8. Make sure that every employee understands and works toward the mission.
9. There are going to be difficult times and you need to be resilient; whining is a waste of time.
10. There will be sacrifices. Work to find a balance so that you don't become a financially successful loser. It's not about the income, it's about the outcome.

That's my Top 10 list. I'm sure there are more. What do you think is missing?

Jay Goltz owns five small businesses in Chicago.

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-The 21E.com Team
